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 FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
 TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1701
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STATE ALSO FOR SC/T P. WILCOX

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
 TAGS: PTER, PGOV, IR, AR
 SUBJECT: THE IRAN CONNECTION: IRAN STAYS IN THE
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 - DOCK FOR THE AMIA BOMBING

REF: BUENOS AIRES 5279 AND PREVIOUS

1. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT

2. SUMMARY: SINCE THE BOMBING OF THE JEWISH MUTUAL
 ASSOCIATION (AMIA) BUILDING ON JULY 18, THE ARGENTINE
 PRESS AND PUBLIC HAVE ACTIVELY DEBATED THE CULPABILITY
 OF IRAN IN THE ATTACK. THESE CONTINUING EXCHANGES
 HAVE INVOLVED PRESIDENT MENEM AND HIS SENIOR

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MINISTERS, THE IRANIAN GOVERNMENT AND ITS SURROGATES, AS WELL AS THIS EMBASSY AND OTHER HIGH-LEVEL USG SPOKESMEN. THE BATTLE FOR PUBLIC OPINION HAS BEEN, AT ITS HEART, AN EFFORT TO DEMONSTRATE THAT IRAN DESERVES CONDEMNATION FOR ITS STATE-SUPPORTED TERRORISM EVEN WITHOUT HARD, PHYSICAL EVIDENCE OF ITS INVOLVEMENT IN THIS SPECIFIC ATTACK. EFFECTIVE PUBLIC COUNTERPUNCHING HAS OFFSET IRANIAN PROTESTATIONS OF INNOCENCE, WEAK EVIDENCE IN THE AMIA CASE, AND ACCUSATIONS ABOUT PLOTS AGAINST IRAN BY U.S. AND ISRAELI INTELLIGENCE SERVICES. IRAN HAS THUS BEEN PREVENTED FROM ADOPTING AN APPEARANCE OF AGGRIEVED INNOCENCE EVEN IN THE ABSENCE OF DIRECT LINKS BETWEEN GOI OFFICIALS AND THE TERRORIST ATTACK. THIS, IN TURN, HAS STIFFENED THE SPINE OF THE MENEM GOVERNMENT IN CONFRONTING PUBLIC SKEPTICISM AND IRANIAN ANGER OVER ACCUSATIONS ABOUT IRAN'S COMPLICITY. THIS REPORT IS IN PART INTENDED AS A PARTIAL SCENE-SETTER FOR THE UPCOMING VISIT OF AN INTERAGENCY ANTI-TERRORIST GROUP TO BUENOS AIRES. END SUMMARY.

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3. SHORTLY AFTER THE JULY 18 AMIA BOMBING, PRIME MINISTER RABIN AND THE ISRAELI SPOKESMEN FIRST ADE THE ACCUSATION THAT THE TERRORIST ATTACK WAS THE RESULT OF IRANIAN SUPPORT FOR AN "INTERNATIOAL SYSTEM OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM." THESE COMMENTS HAVE BEEN ECHOED OVER THE LAST FIVE WEEKS BY A VRIETY OF ARGENTINE AND AMERICAN SPOKESMEN AS THE MIA INVESTIGATION HAS HALTINGLY MOVED FORWARD. INCE THESE ACCUSATIONS SURFACED, IRAN HAS BEEN EUALLY VOCIFEROUS IN DENYING ITS GUILT AND IMPUTIG AN ANTI-ISLAMIC PLOT AS ITS ACCUSERS' SOLE MOTVATION. THIS PUBLIC BATTLE HAS CONTINUED UP TO TH PRESENT, ALTHOUGH, IN ARGENTINA AT LEAST, IRANIN PROTESTATIONS OF INNOCENCE ARE SOUNDING MORE HOLLOW THAN EVER IN LIGHT OF GROWING INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE TO CONDEMN IRAN OPENLY FOR ITS SUPPORT OF TERRORISM.

4. IRAN, SUPPORTED BY CRITICS OF EVIDENCE LINKING THE IRANIANS TO THE BOMBING (REFTEL) HAS KEPT UP AN ACTIVE CAMPAIGN TO ENCOURAGE SKEPTICISM ABOUT ITS ALLEGED ROLE AND WARD OFF ANY POSSIBLE GOA DIPLOMATIC REPRISALS.

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-- IRANIANS HAVE TIRELESSLY REITERATED THE CHARGE THAT U.S. AND ISRAELI INTELLIGENCE AGENTS HAVE CONCOCTED ACCUSATIONS AGAINST A BLAMELESS IRAN AND EVEN MAY BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE BOMBING THEMSELVES IN AN ATTEMPT TO SMEAR IRAN'S "GOOD NAME."

-- EFFECTIVE EFFORTS HAVE BEEN MADE TO PUBLICIZE
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OFFICIAL DOUBTS ABOUT THE CHARACTER AND TESTIMONY OF FORMER IRANIAN OFFICIAL MONOUCHEH MOATAMER, THE CHIEF SOURCE FOR ARGENTINA'S ACCUSATIONS AGAINST IRAN. THESE SKEPTICS HAVE EVEN INCLUDED ARGENTINE FOREIGN MINISTER DI TELLA AND U.S. OFFICIALS SPEAKING ON BACKGROUND OR, REPORTEDLY, IN DIPLOMATIC EXCHANGES WITH THE ARGENTINES.

-- THE FOREIGN MINISTER HAS ALSO ATTEMPTED TO DAMPEN PUBLIC AND ALLEGED U.S. PRESSURE FOR A DIPLOMATIC BREAK WITH IRAN, AT TIMES UNDERCUTTING STATEMENTS BY PRESIDENT MENEM HIMSELF THREATENING SUCH ACTION.

5. THESE ATTEMPTS TO EXONERATE THE IRANIAN REGIME, OR AT LEAST MITIGATE THE ACCUSATIONS AGAINST IT, FORTUNATELY HAVE BEEN EFFECTIVELY COUNTERED ON A VARIETY OF LEVELS. STATEMENTS BY SECRETARY CHRISTOPHER DRAWING ATTENTION TO PROVEN IRANIAN LINKS

TO WORLD TERRORISM AND ITS POSSIBLE INVOLVEMENT IN THE AMIA ATTACK HAVE ELICITED IRANIAN DEMANDS FOR APOLOGIES. A STEADY STREAM OF PUBLIC COMMENTS NOTING IRAN'S LINKS TO TERRORISM BY OTHER HIGH-LEVEL SPOKESMEN HAVE ECHOED THE SECRETARY'S REMARKS. THESE STATEMENTS HAVE RESONATED IN THE ARGENTINE PRESS AND PUBLIC OPINION. THEY ALSO INCLUDE:

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-- THE TESTIMONY OF THEN S/CT COORDINATOR BODINE
REGARDING IRAN'S WORLDWIDE SUPPORT OF TERRORISM AND
THE NEED TO FULLY INVESTIGATE POSSIBLE LINKS BETWEEN
IRAN AND THE AMIA ATTACK.

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-- SEVERAL STATEMENTS BY U.S. AMBASSADOR WIDELY REPORTED IN ARGENTINE PRESS CALLED FOR ATTENTION TO IRAN'S ROLE IN GLOBAL TERRORISM AND EXPRESSED U.S. SUPPORT FOR WHATEVER MEASURES THE MENEM GOVERNMENT FELT APPROPRIATE TO TAKE TOWARD IRAN AS A RESULT OF ITS INVESTIGATIONS.

-- PRESIDENT MENEM HIMSELF HAS MADE SEVERAL STATEMENTS TO THE PRESS EXPRESSING HIS PERSONAL SUSPICIONS ABOUT IRANIAN LINKS TO THE BOMBING AFTER ARGENTINE SPECIAL PROSECUTOR GALEANO IMPLICATED AT LEAST FOUR IRANIAN DIPLOMATS IN THE ATTACK.

-- MOST RECENTLY, PRESIDENT CLINTON'S WIDELY PUBLICIZED STATEMENT LAST WEEK LABELLING IRAN AS THE "WORLD'S LEADING SPONSOR OF STATE TERRORISM" RECEIVED WIDE AND PROMINENT COVERAGE HERE.

6. IN THE MOST RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE GOVERNMENT'S FALTERING AMIA INVESTIGATION, ARGENTINE PROSECUTOR GENERAL ITURBE AND THE ARGENTINE SUPREME COURT, WHICH HAS ORIGINAL JURISDICTION OVER CASES INVOLVING DIPLOMATS, PUBLICLY DECLINED AUGUST 25 TO

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PROCEED WITH A CASE AGAINST THE IRANIAN DIPLOMATS ACCUSED OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE AMIA BOMBING. CITING LACK OF EVIDENCE, BOTH THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL AND THE COURT SENT THE CASE BACK TO FEDERAL JUDGE GALEANO, WHO IS COORDINATING THE AMIA INVESTIGATION, AND ASKED FOR FURTHER EVIDENCE BEFORE EVEN CALLING THE IRANIANS AS WITNESSES. GALEANO NOW APPEARS NEARLY ALONE IN HIS PUBLIC ACCUSATIONS AGAINST THE IRANIANS AND THE PRESS HAS HIGHLIGHTED IRANIAN DEMANDS FOR "COMPENSATION" ON BEHALF OF THE "FALSELY ACCUSED" DIPLOMATS.

7. DIRECTLY COUNTERING THESE CLAIMS OF INNOCENCE, EMBASSY RECEIVED GOOD PRESS COVERAGE AUGUST 26 FOR ITS RELEASE OF EXCERPTS ON IRAN FROM THE DEPARTMENT'S "PATTERNS OF GLOBAL TERRORISM" REPORT. THE TRANSLATED EXCERPTS LAY OUT THE CASE FOR THE CONDEMNATION OF IRAN BY THE WORLD COMMUNITY FOR ITS ACTIVE SUPPORT OF TERRORISM AND, IN PARTICULAR, DESCRIBE ITS PATRONAGE OF HIZBOLLAH, WIDELY SUSPECTED AS THE CULPRIT IN THE AMIA BOMBING. PROMINENT COVERAGE OF THE RELEASE IN ARGENTINA'S BIGGEST DAILY LINKED THE STATEMENTS OF

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PRESIDENT CLINTON TO THE REPORT. THIS STORY WAS BOLSTERED BY EVEN WIDER PRESS COVERAGE THE SAME DAY OF THE LEAKED DELIBERATIONS OF THE U.N. HUMAN RIGHT COMMISSION IN GENEVA, IN WHICH THE RESOLUTION CALLING ON IRAN TO CEASE ITS SUPPORT OF TERRORISM AND COOPERATE WITH AUTHORITIES INVESTIGATING ATTACKS, PASSED BY A COMFORTABLE MARGIN. SOURCES IN THE ARGENTINE MFA, MEANWHILE, ARE QUOTED AS SAYING THAT ALTHOUGH THE AMIA BOMBING IS NOT EXPRESSLY NAMED IN THE RESOLUTION, IT CLEARLY WAS TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT WHEN

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THE MEASURE WAS WRITTEN.

8. JUST ON THE HEELS OF THESE STORIES, CLARIN PUBLISHED INTERVIEWS AUGUST 28 WITH HIZBOLLAH LEADERS SOHBI TUFAILI AND NAHIM KASSEM, PURPORTED TO BE NUMBER TWO IN THE ORGANIZATION. THE INTERVIEWS ARE A DEVASTATING PORTRAIT OF A VIOLENTLY RADICAL ORGANIZATION ANIMATED BY FANATICISM AND HATRED. CLAIMS BY TUFAILI AND KASSEM THAT HIZBOLLAH IS A LEGITIMATE LEBANESE POLITICAL PARTY ARE VIVIDLY UNDERCUT BY THEIR BOLDLY ANTI-SEMITIC COMMENTS AND VIOLENT REJECTION OF PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST, INCLUDING CONDONING THE USE OF SUICIDE TERRORIST ATTACKS. TUFAILI ENDS HIS INTERVIEW BY AFFIRMING HIS EARLIER STATEMENTS THAT HIZBOLLAH WOULD CONTINUE TO TARGET JEWS FOR ASSASSINATION EVEN IF THE ISRAELIS SHOULD WITHDRAW FROM SOUTHERN LEBANON BECAUSE "WE WILL CONTINUE THE WAR AGAINST ALL THE JEWS WHO LIVE IN BEIRUT AND THOSE WHO LIVE IN PALESTINE, THAT IS MY OPINI
ON."

9. COMMENT: THE TO AND FRO OVER THE IRANIAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE AMIA BOMBING ARE FAR FROM OVER EVEN AS THE PAINFUL SHOCK OF THE EVENT BEGINS TO REcede IN TIME. DESPITE THE RELATIVELY WEAK ARGENTINE CASE

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AGAINST IRAN IN THE AMIA ATTACK AND VOCIFEROUS IRANIAN
DENIALS, A STEADY CAMPAIGN TO KEEP IRANIAN COMPLICITY
IN GLOBAL TERRORISM IN THE PUBLIC EYE HAS KEPT THE

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IRANIANS IN THE DOCK WHERE THEY BELONG. WHILE THEY
MAY ESCAPE CONVICTION IN THE AMIA BOMBING ON A
TECHNICALITY, THERE WILL REMAIN STRONG PUBLIC BELIEF
IN IRAN'S COMPLICITY IN THE BARBAROUS ATTACKS HERE AND
ELSEWHERE.

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